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Our University – Appearances

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Our University – Appearances

There is an old Madison Avenue adage suggesting that interviewees make sure the heels of their shoes are shined as that is the last thing the interviewer will see when they leave the office.

Good point, but first impressions may leave a more lasting impact.

In a 2007 Noel-Levitz study of factors that influenced freshmen to choose one university over another, over 35,000 new freshmen were asked why they chose a particular university.

Some of the findings were unremarkable. Public and private universities as well as community colleges were studied, and, while there were differences in institution types, the top three “most important” issues were: Financial Aid, Cost - essentially identical - and quality, expressed as Academic Reputation.

What fascinated me was that Campus Appearance appeared at number 5 on the list after Personalized Attention. Size and geographic location figured into the equation too, but after Campus Appearance. Recommendations from Family/Friends were next to the bottom of the heap, only exceeded in its lack of importance in decision-making by the Opportunity to Play Sports. I thought Family and Friends would have more influence.

There are two forces at work in this matrix that university leadership has significant control over, and neither is cost. Cost is subject to outside influences, pension systems mandated by the state, materials, labor, and fuel. Savings might be possible, but incremental. I am not suggesting that universities not keep costs low as efficiency is the first form of excellence. But if keeping costs low results in an unsightly campus, the natives may be anesthetized or not care, but rest assured, the guests care.

The first force is Academic Reputation. While resources must be available to attract and retain the best faculty, and after a group of faculty is assembled, excellence can be encouraged through real merit reward systems, if leadership has the courage to recognize excellence and set standards of performance in classrooms and laboratories that foster quality in teaching and learning.

The second force is Campus Appearance.

Here is a simple list that commands attention.

Don't allow the grass to go un-mowed. It looks like disregard.

Don't let paint peel. It looks like neglect.

Don't park trucks on the grass or sidewalks. It looks like indifference.

Don't leave sidewalks un-edged. It looks like apathy

Don't use shower curtains for restroom stall doors. It looks like disrespect.

Don't ever say, "This is good enough for the people we serve." Never say it, don't even think it. It translates into dishonor and wanton neglect.

Appearances are critical to how a university is perceived, and significantly impact student decisions about where to study.

A dozen years ago I was being interviewed for a presidency at a university. I was asked by a Board member if I had ever visited the campus. My wife and I had been on campus the previous week, incognito, just to see the place and get a sense of what it was about.

I told him, "Yes, my wife and I recently visited the university."

He said, "What do you think?"

I was honest to the point of insensitivity and said, "If I was touring the campus with my son, I would strongly suggest that he not consider coming here...It looks like nobody cares!", I said, "It may not be true, but, that's how it appears".

Maybe too honest, too little varnish, spin, and calculation, but truthful.

He got the idea. I didn't get the job. The campus is still probably a mess, and I bet they are fighting enrollment battles.

At our university and others, appearances are important and underestimated at the highest cost.